

Destroying FEMA

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In the days to come, as the nation and the people along the Gulf Coast work to cope with the disastrous aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we will be reminded anew, how important it is to have a federal agency capable of dealing with natural catastrophes of this sort. This is an immense human tragedy, one that will work hardship on millions of people. It is beyond the capabilities of state and local government to deal with. It requires a national response.

Which makes it all the more difficult to understand why, at this moment, the country's premier agency for dealing with such events -- FEMA -- is being, in effect, systematically downgraded and all but dismantled by the Department of Homeland Security.

Apparently homeland security now consists almost entirely of protection against terrorist acts. How else to explain why the Federal Emergency Management Agency will no longer be responsible for disaster preparedness? Given our country's long record of natural disasters, how much sense does this make?

What follows is an obituary for what was once considered the preeminent example of a federal agency doing good for the American public in times of trouble, such as the present.

FEMA was born in 1979, the offspring of a number of federal agencies that had been functioning in an independent and uncoordinated manner to protect the country against natural disasters and nuclear holocaust. In its early years FEMA grew and matured, with formal programs being developed to respond to large-scale disasters and with extensive planning for what is called "continuity of government."

The creation of the federal agency encouraged states, counties and cities to convert from their civil defense organizations and also to establish emergency management agencies to do the requisite planning for disasters. Over time, a philosophy of "all-hazards disaster preparedness" was developed that sought to conserve resources by producing single plans that were applicable to many types of events.

But it was Hurricane Andrew, which hit Florida in 1992, that really energized FEMA. The year after that catastrophic storm, President Bill Clinton appointed James Lee Witt to be director of the agency. Witt was the first professional emergency manager to run the agency. Showing a serious regard for the cost of natural disasters in both economic impact and lives lost or disrupted, Witt reoriented FEMA from civil defense preparations to a focus on natural disaster preparedness and disaster mitigation. In an effort to reduce the repeated loss of

property and lives every time a disaster struck, he started a disaster mitigation effort called "Project Impact." FEMA was elevated to a Cabinet-level agency, in recognition of its important responsibilities coordinating efforts across departmental and governmental lines.

Witt fought for federal funding to support the new program. At its height, only \$20 million was allocated to the national effort, but it worked wonders. One of the best examples of the impact the program had here in the central Puget Sound area and in western Washington state was in protecting people at the time of the Nisqually earthquake on Feb. 28, 2001. Homes had been retrofitted for earthquakes and schools were protected from high-impact structural hazards. Those involved with Project Impact thought it ironic that the day of that quake was also the day that the then-new president chose to announce that Project Impact would be discontinued.

Indeed, the advent of the Bush administration in January 2001 signaled the beginning of the end for FEMA. The newly appointed leadership of the agency showed little interest in its work or in the missions pursued by the departed Witt. Then came the Sept. 11 attacks and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Soon FEMA was being absorbed into the "homeland security borg."

This year it was announced that FEMA is to "officially" lose the disaster preparedness function that it has had since its creation. The move is a death blow to an agency that was already on life support. In fact, FEMA employees have been directed not to become involved in disaster preparedness functions, since a new directorate (yet to be established) will have that mission.

FEMA will be survived by state and local emergency management offices, which are confused about how they fit into the national picture. That's because the focus of the national effort remains terrorism, even if the Department of Homeland Security still talks about "all-hazards preparedness." Those of us in the business of dealing with emergencies find ourselves with no national leadership and no mentors. We are being forced to fend for ourselves, making do with the "homeland security" mission. Our "all-hazards" approaches have been decimated by the administration's preoccupation with terrorism.

To be sure, America may well be hit by another major terrorist attack, and we must be prepared for such an event. But I can guarantee you that hurricanes like the one that ripped into Louisiana and Mississippi yesterday, along with tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, floods, windstorms, mudslides, power outages, fires and perhaps a pandemic flu will have to be dealt with on a weekly and daily basis throughout this country. They are coming for sure, sooner or later, even as we are, to an unconscionable degree, weakening our ability to respond to them.